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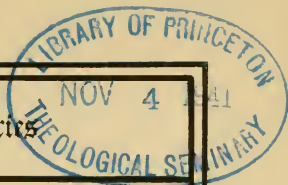
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The Day's Work Series



NOW

BY
ALEXANDER McKENZIE, D. D.



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NOW.

2 Corinthians vi. 2.

THIS is again the new year. The good wishes of our friends are constantly reminding us that we have passed from the old into the new. We enter with hope and purpose upon the waiting months. All which they contain we cannot tell. Exploration and discovery will attend our steps ; but we shall live, and in that is the fact which encircles all that we shall do. Life in this world, or some neighbouring world, is prepared for us. Our duty we know in advance, and conscience is already enthroned. We shall go nowhere from the presence of God, and in his presence is fullness of joy. We may avoid the pleasure if we wish ; but it fills the air in which we have our being. The events which shall enter the annals we have already begun to write we can only describe as we reach them, while there may be some confident forecasting. Duty will come and strength to match it.

We may look for weariness, but for rest also. If we fall upon disappointment and sorrow, it will be where the Comforter offers his solace. The year is already endowed with opportunity. To keep our heart and to be friendly is within our reach. To fear God and keep his commandments, to hold the faith and bear witness to it, to serve the town, to help the country, to assist the world, this we can do. Such things are not subject to vicissitudes. Life has less uncertainty than some imagine. The great interests can be depended on. There will be surprises in order that time may maintain its freshness and variety, but we can form our plans with assurance, and move into them with a steady tread.

The uncertainties lie among the less important things, or relate chiefly to matters of detail. We cannot tell what kind of weather we shall have a week hence. But we can rely upon having some kind of weather, and can make our plans in this confidence. We do not know what particular things may assert their claim upon our time and strength. But we know as well now as we shall in the future that it will be our duty to be honest and honourable, generous and helpful. No change will pass upon the two commandments which include our life. We can say, with Robertson when the darkness gathered about him, and his heart was heavy, and his faith trembled, that there is one thing to be depended

upon,— “it must be right to do right.” “Be true,” he said, “be true.” Nothing can affect this duty, and upon it we may construct our plans with intelligence. We do not know where we shall be a year hence, or a day hence. But we do know that we shall be for a hundred to-morrows, and that wherever we are we shall be with the divine love, with the same principles for the fashioning of our life as we have in this world. The place may change at any moment. It is certain to change before many days. But the change does not involve a reconstruction of our motive and a new arrangement of our affections. I do not know that any event is so greatly overrated as the passing from one world to another. Life is not subject to its control.

We must allow room in our expectations for the unexpected, though our thoughts have the element of prophecy. Nor should we desire more liberty in our anticipation, for we do not know what we shall want after twenty years have passed by. It would be foolish to attempt to lay a heavy mortgage on the coming time, and to insist that then everything should be as we now think we should like to have it. Our desires may well change with our growth. We are to live with others, and what they may choose to do will have its effect upon our own desires. We cannot tell what we shall want until the day when we want it. Nor is it for us alone to determine the events and condi-

tions of our future. A higher wisdom is over our life. An all-embracing mind holds all men in its interest, and makes all things work together toward a common end. It is enough for us to know that which is vital and essential, and for the rest to live by the day whose evil and whose good are sufficient unto it. Even the divine promises, certain as they are, leave much to be found out only in their fulfilment. In the classic chapter on faith the unknown writer does not hesitate to say that the heroic men whom he presents "died in faith, not having received the promises, but having seen them and greeted them from afar." What does this mean, but that even the promises which are given for our guidance and encouragement, and which are to be utterly trusted and held precious, are not in all cases to be limited to the letter, or confined to our ability to understand them and appreciate their meaning? In the obedient mind they are enlarged, and with this is a grateful contentment. I am not willing to say, with Robertson, that "God's promises never are fulfilled in the sense in which they seem to have been given." But this at least is clear, that they are fulfilled beyond the sense in which they seem to have been given. We must allow our Father in heaven to do for us larger and better things than with our imperfect vision we could foresee. The surprise will always come upon that side.

“ Yet ships there are that never reach their haven.
On, on, my soul ! Thou shalt not miss thy haven.”

We may, therefore, advance with assurance into the coming hours, the coming centuries. Life is ordered for us as intelligent persons, who can understand themselves and know the present day, and anticipate the future. There is no need of drifting, or of moving timidly. Life is a business with well-ordered methods, and not a lottery where the turn of the wheel determines our fortune. Chance is not sovereign in the world, nor fate ; but Providence, that is, God, — the Father of all men. Farming is a trustworthy employment because whatsoever a man sows that he shall reap. This is the law of life. We choose the harvest when we choose the seed.

One thing alarms us as we cross the boundary lines which separate our years, and that is the swiftness with which we are brought to them. Yet they are of our own making. There are no lines, more than there are meridians upon the globe or fences among the stars. There is no jarring of the ship even when it crosses the equator. Time is simply the element in which we move, and moment flows into moment as wave slips into wave. We need not be aware of the transition. Each period of life has its own character and offers its own opportunity. We move steadily away from the day of our birth, but we do

not move toward the end of our days. Time glides into the estate which we carelessly call eternity, though this is as really eternity as any day we shall have. There is no pause or break in the course of our years. There is time enough in this world for the work we have to do here, and we should not lessen the force of our life by any thought of its brevity. The interesting, pathetic comparison of one of our writers, that at fifty a man is on deck, at sixty in the cabin, at seventy on a raft, and at eighty on a spar, however much of truth there may be in it as regards some men, is not to be taken as the rule in life. The deck is pleasanter than the cabin, and if the man cannot go to the masthead as he once did, he can give his orders to men of more nimble feet, and not consent to take refuge on a spar. From the stir of younger days a man may gain the right to withdraw; but then life should be richer and wiser, and of persistent usefulness. The time "to take in sail" does not come to us. Rather, if we have fewer days in which to reach our port, must we give all our sails to the favouring wind. It is meant that the old and the young, youth and age, should live together for the common advantage. The visions of the young become dreams, but the dreams are of a real world and a true life within it. I counsel a readjustment of our idea of life and time, for our comfort and strength and achievement.

Still, it is to be confessed that there is meaning in our thought of the celerity of our days. It is more than complaint when we feel that the years are very brief, and rapid in their passing. We are reminded of this by our recurring anniversaries, which almost jostle one another when our years have multiplied.

The air has hardly become still from the good wishes of our friends before they are again beginning to gladden us with their kind desires. The old patriarch, who lived we do not know when, said that his days passed like the ships. But if they did the ships were very slow, for Job lived a hundred and forty years after his recovery. He could hardly complain that the allotment of time was not sufficient for the work which he had to do. Our days pass like the swift ships. We do not usually blame the ships for being fast, and if we are on board we can go as fast as they. We cannot check the world as it wheels around the sun, nor would it avail anything to alter the calendar, and double the months, or arrange the days upon a different scale. We seem helpless as we are hurried on and on. It is a help to know that we are never driven out of life, and that there is a far more exceeding and eternal weight of glory prepared for all who consent to be worthy of it. There is a magnificent consolation in immortality. But however attractive the next world may be, we do not wish to be hastened into it. We

prefer to remain where we are. We want to make more of this world, which has pleasures we have not enjoyed, wisdom we have not acquired, discipline we have not received, and calls to service which we have not answered. It is a good world, and we like to live in it, and we feel very naturally that we have hardly begun to live. For its own purposes, it was made to be as good a world as we shall find when we leave it.

The question presses upon our thoughtful moments, whether it is not possible to get more out of these flying years, and to do more with them. If we cannot make the sun stand still or send back the shadow on the dial, can we not in some other way make the days of more account, and acquire a larger portion of the things which will be of value to us? I have no doubt that we can; that if we cannot make more hours, we can find more advantage in the hours we have, and by using them more prudently virtually extend them. The object of making the sun stand still was to make the day longer, in order that more work might be done, before the darkness closed in. If, then, we get more work into the hours we cannot change, we have attained to the same end as if we could reach our hand among the stars and hold the sun in its course. It is as a suggestion for this purpose that the word *Now* is commended. *Now* is the talisman we need to make

time of larger worth. *Now* is the secret of a fuller life. *Now* is the benediction which will quiet and gladden our spirit. The principle of action which is proposed is this : We can save time by doing things *Now*. That seems a self-evident proposition. It may be so, but it is by no means a common principle of action. I do not wish to lay down any extreme rule, or to give an indiscriminate encouragement to haste, imprudence, thoughtlessness ; but only to leave it as a rule to be applied so far as it can be, in the assurance that it will enlarge the value of our life.

It is true that there are some things which cannot be done now. We have not the material for them. We have not sufficient skill. We are not certain that they ought to be done. For these there must be some period of waiting. But commonly even these things can be begun now, and when we have them in mind it is often the time to carry them through their first stage. In this way we use our desire and intention before we have lost our hold upon them. One of the wise New England teachers of the old days, who was obliged to practise economy in everything, with a scant salary and a large work, gave to the young men under him this maxim : "Seize the moment of excited curiosity." What he meant is clear. You wish to know the meaning of a word. While the wish is upon you, consult the lexicon ; otherwise

the wish may pass away, and you may die without ever knowing what the word means. If you are in need of a date, a fact in history, a truth in science, secure it at once, or the want may pass, and the reward which could easily have been gained when the mind was upon it will never be secured. We need to use the impetus we have. Our interest and desire and intention are a force which must not be allowed to spend itself upon the air. If I may take another very prosaic illustration, when you have kindled the fire and generated the steam, use it. If you do not use it then, you have lost it, and the whole process and the whole expense must be repeated. Do not suffer the steam to vanish till it has done enough to pay for the fuel. For very many things we are able to draw on our experience and our study. We have stored up wisdom. There is no need of our acquiring this again, or of waiting for it. We have it, and without any delay we can put it to use. We are suddenly called upon to do some simple problem in arithmetic, and we do it instantly. We do not feel that it is necessary for us to learn the multiplication table, although the problem depends upon that. We have already acquired the truths which it teaches, and can put them to instant use. So we have learned very many things which it were foolish for us to attempt to learn over again. They do not even need consideration; we have considered them; we have

them. They can be used as well at a moment's notice as after a day's deliberation.

Besides this, we are able to form rapid judgments. If we have a well-working mind, and it is in good order, very often it can as well decide a point on the instant as to take longer time. If it is trained to speed, it ought to work speedily. Our intuitions, our principles, our judgments, should be ready for the instant summons, and should serve us without delay. A man's mind is very sluggish if it cannot decide the ordinary questions of life at the time when they arise. That is one result which comes through mental discipline and moral training. It is not that we can work out prudent results, but that we can produce them quickly, and yet have them as trustworthy as if with dull, undisciplined faculties we had worried over them for days. We do not make enough of what we have already learned. We are like men who have earned money, placed it in the bank, and who then go about penniless, trying to earn money to put in the bank! Life is expensive. What we know is costly. We ought to trust the wisdom for which we have paid dearly. There should be a confidence in our opinions and decisions which will foster economy. We ought to be able to regard our decisions very much as the courts do. They do not need to rehear every case, but can fall back on their authorities. We should be able to rest on opinions which we

formed a year ago, on principles of life which we discovered to be wise. In this way we have the advantage of the things that we have done.

All of us have rules of living which we have proved. They work well and we are happy in their use. It is to be presumed that we approve our methods of life, otherwise we should change them; that we think of them with pleasure; that we regard with a mild admiration our sagacity in framing such ways of living. With great composure we regard our principles and reflect upon the use we have made of them. We do not boast of them frequently, though on occasion we are ready to do this. We may not teach our ideas to young men; but we are gratified when some one else presents them, or adopts them, as a wise system of living. What we say in effect is this, — not in words, but in the very fact that it is true: “These are the ways in which a man of my intelligence and condition ought to live. The best working of my mind and of my heart convinces me that in general I am doing as a man in my circumstances ought to do. If I did not think so, I should certainly amend my ways.” I have drawn this out until it would appear that very few men would actually make these words their own. Yet what are they, after all, but self-approval? The testimony of a man’s consciousness to his own discretion, and to the confidence that he is living as a man in his position ought

to live, every good man is entitled to have. But now, to a man thus admirably furnished, there comes a demand for service, for assistance. If he does not know the merits of the request which is made, let him wait. He is entitled to the information which nothing has given him. The matter lies so far aside from his business that he must needs go beyond his path and examine it, as something new. But suppose he does know the merits of the request. Why should he not instantly give his answer? Yet how often will he consider it for an hour, then dismiss the applicant and postpone the decision. On another day, he may take another hour of his time and his friend's, and possibly another, later on, using up hours of time on a matter which did not require minutes; and he will do this, when he knows at first, instantly, what he ought to do. He simply squanders his own time and the time of the other by refusing to act now. Time is thus wasted when it can never be regained, and is bearing us rapidly beyond the world, while we are not able with all our diligence to get half the good that waits to be secured. I know very well what is said, that we must not be hasty. But why not hasty? It is no disadvantage in an action that it is quick. We should not be reckless; but to do a thing promptly is not recklessness; to use the fire the first time it is kindled is not carelessness. There are times when we must grant

ourselves delay. They are not very common. I doubt if we gain anything by this daily waste of time. As I look upon the lives of men, it seems to me that more men fail to make a success of living through delay than through haste, and that what is called prudence results in more disappointments than what is called daring. We are not children. We have treasures of experience and training within us. It is not irrational to make use of these now. There is always some hazard in life, and there must be if life is to have any accomplishment. Fear is a less faithful servitor than courage. "Thou hast ventured deeply, but all must do so who would deeply win."

There is a question of sincerity here. We must be honest with ourselves and with others. Are we honest when we profess to put off the decision and have already made it, giving encouragement of help which we have decided not to render? To trifle with ourselves and with our neighbours is a serious offence, a serious wrong to our own life. Hesitation seems to disclose some infirmity of judgment or feebleness of will. One of the ablest men I have known, and one of the kindest, who could not bear to say a displeasing word, once told me this: "When I tell a man 'I will think of it,' I mean that I will not do it." Is it not so with all of us at times, and is it well for us? Is it generous? Would there

not come to our minds, and to our business, a tonic which would do us good and give vigour to all our work if we would take into our plans this word *now*, and live by it. It is not easy to give a precise rule. But it is clear that the more rapidly we can form our purposes, and the less time we give to going over ground we have crossed before, the better off we are.

“So many worlds, so much to do;
So little done, such things to be.”

But leaving these matters wherein the principle seems to find good application, let us advance into the domain of thought. There are some things which are very well settled in our minds. We were taught them in our childhood. They have grown with our growth. Many influences have contributed to their formation, till we have quite a substantial body of truth, of ethical and religious truth of whose worth we are confident. We regard these truths as fixed. It is said of a noted English teacher that he rose every morning with the feeling that everything was an open question. There is no need of that. Some things are quite well determined, and yet we do not get the good of them. We are waiting for something additional. There are one or two points on which we are not quite clear, so that we hesitate to declare our belief and to act upon it openly. If we would take the truth that we have and put it in use

now, declare it, teach it, let it prove its vitality, we should come by degrees into the possession of larger truth, and our questionings would either bring us into knowledge or cease to afflict us. We should add more to our character and usefulness if we would let the mind rest in what we know while we go on and live. If we have gone two-thirds the way up the mountain, we are by so much nearer the summit than we were before we started.

The same principle applies to our character. We have the feeling that we are Christian men,—at least, we think so. Our friends believe it. It will be said of us when we have gone. We look back upon certain experiences of our life when we thought we began to be Christians, and we recall the pleasure that we had in new motives and desires. We propose when we get more assurance to declare ourselves Christians, to make all doubt vanish, to enter into the fellowship of the church, to engage in Christian service. This delay is all irrational. We ought to begin now. The way to get more feeling is instantly to use the feeling we have. The way to secure more confidence is to make confession of the faith which has already been given to us, and to join to it the works which shall at once prove it and enlarge it. It is sad to see how much time people lose in entering the Christian life. They approach it; they recede from it; again and again advancing, retreating, perhaps

after all never attaining, when they might on any day rest in confidence if they would put to use what they have then ; and this, when time is passing so rapidly, and the Christian life so much needs this world, and this world so much needs the Christian life. It is very fine to see John and James at their boat. When the Master calls "Follow me," they leave their nets, leave their boat, and follow him, and to the duty of discipleship add the special grace of *now*. So Matthew sat at the receipt of custom, and when Jesus said "Follow me," he left all, rose up, and followed him. It was fine. Saul of Tarsus was rushing with mad haste into Damascus, when suddenly he was stopped. "Saul, Saul." "Lord, what wilt thou have me to do?" In that moment he became a ruler, and the world has felt his sway ever since. It was the *now* that gave honour, dignity, grace.

In our belief and our life we may frequently go over the way by which we have come, over the truths that we hold, over the work that we are doing. This sometimes has its advantage. But until the days get longer and more numerous, we cannot give much time to retracing our steps. Self-examination, which used to be insisted upon, is less commended now. The change is a wise one. It is necessary to know ourselves, but the study must be done rarely and rapidly. Reviews are

supposed to be useful, but what should we think of a school where the teaching was done in two days of the week and the rest of the time was spent in reviewing it. If we have learned a thing, let it stay learned. In the parable, the man who sowed the seed which sprang up, he knew not how, does not appear to have looked to see how it had sprung up, or to question the fact. With nature working for him day and night, he could not keep up and do his part unless he gave all his attention to the harvest. This forward pressing is the pleasanter. We do not advance rapidly by the circular movement. We can use up time as certainly by going round and round, but there is not so much pleasure in it, and there is less result. This prompt-spirited action will quicken others, incite them to earnest and rapid effort. By it we enlarge our good work and save time. Everything which appeals to us seems to call upon us, "Be quick!" "Say not ye, there are yet four months and then cometh the harvest? Behold I say unto you, Lift up your eyes and look on the fields; that they are white already unto harvest."

There is one danger at the opening of the year. We are likely to form good resolutions. We are fond of them. They are flattering and inexpensive, easily made, and easily disappointing. Sometimes advantage results from them; but commonly the advantage could have dispensed with them. Few

cheap things wear well. Resolutions do not take strong hold upon conscience. They are too much the outgrowth of times and events, and disappear with the occasion which produced them, or soon after. We all of us have many lying along the path where we have been walking, and for them we have no use. Good resolves and good habits belong together. They are excellent if we are able to use them, but good habits put us inside the house and good resolutions shut the door.

Of course, in themselves, good habits are better than bad habits. In permanent action it may not prove so. Good habits are likely to make us mechanical, and content with doing what can be done easily because we are used to doing it. This hinders advance and holds us to the past. There is always danger when to-day is a repetition of yesterday. Life may come to be a long yesterday. This may save us from buying a new almanac, but the economy is not profitable. Good habits are likely to create satisfaction, and satisfaction with ourselves is perilous. We need to be alert, with our minds quick, and our eyes looking before us. A bad habit is less desirable ; but for that reason it may turn out to be of more use. If it makes us discontented, as it is likely to do in our sober moments, it may drive us on to better conduct. It holds the possibility of changing for the better. We are to bring to each

morning the wisdom of other days ; but this is not to be kept under lock and key, but to be at hand, where it can both live and grow. Each day is a new day and needs a new man. Lose nothing good which you have gained, but let it increase. Do not forget that there is something to be done ; in the complacency of a past intention to do something, live — move. In the light of this day live this day. An old purpose, a venerable custom, may have virtue. Better a strong, fresh will, vigorous, enterprising, under the guidance of reason and conscience, with the inspiration of immediate necessity and opportunity.

The ready way to find out if there is virtue in our good resolution is to begin to transform it into action.

See if you are willing to pay the price which this demands, and to bear the effort. If your good resolution or good habit, consciously or unconsciously, hinders you from doing that which you now desire to do, as may not unlikely be the case, then it is worse than useless. Indeed, the rule, if we are to have any, may well be this : Do what ought to be done ; give what ought to be given ; say what ought to be said ; be what you ought to be, and do it *now*. I do not attempt to give regulations for ordering life. A man must judge for himself what he ought to do, and find by experience the best way to do it. Yet I

venture to present a few maxims which I have learned to be true :

Finish your work with the impulse you start with.

Do your work so well you will not need to do it over.

Do your reasoning so well it will not need revision.

In doubtful cases do the generous thing.

Let your mistakes be on the liberal side.

Do your best and trust in God.

“Whatsoever your hand findeth to do, do it with your might,” and do it *now*.

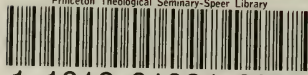
Let us think for a moment upon the more distinctly religious aspects of this principle. This is indeed the rule of the Christian life. Our Lord, when he was here, was presenting his benefits to men, and asking them to receive them at once. He gave *now*. He had come to give immediately, and men could not too soon take what he offered them. He gave them his blessing. It was a present beatitude. He gave them duty, which was immediate honour. He gave them life, which was to be for ever, but was to have its beginning on the day he offered it. Why should he not give at once? Can we imagine him delaying to bestow his favour when it was in his hand? Can we think of his bidding a man come at some other time, when he was ready at once in his ability to bless? A man came to him, and asked him to come down and heal his son.

Jesus said, "Go thy way ; thy son liveth." He healed him instantly, without even the delay of a journey. He met a man going to his burial, stopped the procession by the side of the road, took the young man by the hand, and lifted him up to life. If ever for a little he detained his miracle, it was that he might enlarge it when there was more that he could do. What is becoming on our part but the same promptness? He calls us to himself. When shall we come? We mean at some time to enter upon discipleship, but life is too short for delay. The only time to come to him is when he comes to us, and that is *now*. That which he asks of us cannot be rendered too soon. He asks our repentance, which should be instant, and our faith wherein the heart should at once go out to him ; and our obedience, which should begin where we stand ; and our service, which should instantly draw out sympathy and help. If we are already Christ's disciples, we think upon a more earnest life, of more prayer, more study, more ministry to others. When shall this begin? There is but one time. If we mean to pray more, this is the hour to prove it. If we mean to be more active in Christian service, this is the day to do it. If we mean to fill up the full measure of a life of Christian honour and usefulness, behold now is the acceptable time. This grand decision to be Christ's disciples, to be wholly, actively, usefully his disciples, raises

- the whole life, lifts all our lesser thoughts, invigorates the will, bears us upward and onward. In the strength of life we keep pace with our years, and we make the most of time, when we rule the year with *now*.

THE END.

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